

Social Science and Language in Schools: Some Preliminary Notes

Manish Jain | rumanish@gmail.com

Manish Jain is Associate Professor at the School of Education Studies, Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD), India. Before joining AUD, he was a school teacher and a faculty member at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai. His teaching and research interests lie at the intersection of history, politics and sociology of education.

Key Words: Social Science, Language, Power, History, Context, Voice

Abstract

In this paper, I will try to understand the relationship between Social Science and language by examining different perspectives of their meaning and nature. It foregrounds questions of history, context and contestations around power to situate the role of language in making sense of or masking the "social" in a Social Science classroom or text.

Introduction

In a discussion, it is often assumed that the meaning of the terms we use is clear to everyone. How misplaced this assumption is, can be understood when we engage with the discourses in different disciplines, especially Social Sciences. In this context, in the first section of this essay, I will discuss what is meant by Social Science and the role of language in it at the middle and secondary levels in schools. In the second section of this essay, I will draw attention to the purpose(s) of teaching Social Science in schools, and the possible demands these distinct purposes may make with regard to language in the discipline of Social Science. In the third section, I will describe the changes incorporated in Social Science textbooks and classrooms and the possibilities and challenges with regard to how language is used in the teaching of Social Science.

What is Social Science, What is Language

If we contrast the term "Social Sciences" with Natural Sciences, the object of the query comes out pretty clearly. Social Sciences focus on the social life of humans. This is in contrast with natural sciences, in which the "natural", the physical and the biological form the realm of knowledge creation. The Social Sciences are supposed to teach about society with reference to time (History), space (Geography), power and authority (Political Science), society and economy (Sociology and Economics). If this is what Social Science is about, then shouldn't the lenses of history, power, space and every day, guide us on how we think about language?

Given the colonial past of India, the question of language assumes a distinct dimension. In this context, English is not just a language, but it also represents a worldview, and denotes power. Access to, knowledge of and command over English in the past and contemporary times were/are mediated through a web of social locations and relations, institutions and aspirations shaped by political economy. Colonial experience and the colonial education system participated in the standardization of regional languages and the development of cultural identities associated with these languages. While earlier, the dominant groups in a region used the process of standardization to sanitize and purify a language, and thereby claim to participate in educating and reforming the unreformed masses, the emergence of counter public spheres questioned this language (Sevlam & Geetha, 2009). Pandian cites the examples of two Tamil autobiographies Karukku and Vadu by Dalit writers Bama and Gunasekharan respectively, which "use colloquial Tamil with its regional and caste inflections", and "establish the ordinary as their chosen domain" (Pandian, 2008, p. 35).

In this context, the use of formal and grammatically correct language to explain Social Science is no longer just a question meant to elucidate ideas and concepts, but it makes demands on the students to read, write and speak in a certain language that is considered as desirable, ideal and standard. This demand, in the process, marginalizes other uses and forms of language. Thus, thinking about the use of language in the Social Science, one cannot evade the questions of power, resistance, culture and identities. These questions are not just themes in the domain of the Social Sciences, but become a lived reality in the very process of transaction of Social Science in a classroom.

This takes us to a different set of questions about language. In the universal humanist tradition, language simply mirrors social reality and is objective. However, poststructural theories of language have questioned this premise as well as the unmarked rational speaking self-located outside history and context, to claim objectivity and universal rationality. These theories argue that there is no fixed meaning of language, and it can be disputed based on the context. They have further pointed out how, the word constructs the world and knowledge is deeply conjoined with power.

Such questions about language pose a series of questions about language and Social Science. To encourage an understanding of social phenomenon, institutions and processes in concrete contexts, the Social Science textbooks need to use narratives, auto/biographies and literature as well. Students need to read and make sense of the narratives to paraphrase the argument, evidence or example in their own language, and to draw a comparison between various situations or vis-a-vis the experience and ideas of themselves or their classmates. Such a conversation demands and encourages greater mastery over language to articulate one's understanding and ideas.

Therefore, the language of Social Science cannot be a language of finality, but has to invite the students to bring their own knowledge, understanding and experiences to think about the concepts, theories and phenomenon discussed in the class. The use of language of affect, which gives space to disgust, pain, anger and degradation experienced through the everyday violence of caste and other structures of inequality and dominance, gives experiences their meaning and asks its readers to make a moral and political choice (Pandian, 2008). Historical awareness of the process of language formation and ongoing transformations

and contestations around it ask us to not label a child's home language as a "lack" or a "deficit". The language of the Social Science class and textbooks has to be comprehensible, "gender-sensitive, and critical of social hierarchies and inequalities of all kinds" (NCERT, 2006, p. 5).

Contesting Aims of Teaching Social Science in Schools

We can classify the purpose and justification of teaching Social Science in schools in two distinct categories as follows:

- a) Teaching Social Science to transmit facts and values to make better citizens who are aware of their rights and duties, participate in society, improve social and national efficiency and cohesiveness by developing certain common predispositions, attitudes, values, work ethics, etc.
- b) Teaching Social Science as part of liberal education to develop a reflective thinking and democratic citizenship, and to make students aware of the structural inequities and injustice in society so that they can critique and change it.

In a democratic society, education is expected to develop individual and collective capacities to promote reflection on the past and the present. This reflexivity, as a key cultural dimension of modernity is closely tied with the emphasis on rationality to examine existing social institutions, practices and values, and reorder them. For such reflexivity, developing the ability to examine evidence and deliberate on the basis of social practices, beliefs and decisions is essential. Social Science as a school subject, in its engagement with the "social", assumes a key responsibility in this process.

The role of language in Social Science is determined by the perspective guiding our aims of teaching Social Science in schools. The language of Social Science can be used to mask the inequalities, injustice and oppression in the society, or to draw attention to the social structures, constitution and operation of power in society and question it. Both Social Science and its language can either develop a sense of helplessness and acceptance of the unjust social order as being natural, normal and divinely ordained, or can promote a sense of agency among individual and collectivities to refashion social relations and structures. To make sense of the world in which they exist, students need to engage in a collective dialogue with each other. The new NCERT history textbooks, guided by the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, introduced students to how evidence is collected and examined, and how different evidence is compared when they seem to be contradictory (George & Madan, 2009, p. 33).

Historically, Social Science textbooks in general and Civics textbooks in particular have used very formal and legalistic language in their discussions on the institutions of the State. Such a language carries an authority of distance and has no space for children to discuss their experiences, or question "official knowledge". As a result, students develop an abstract image of society. Further, neither does such a legalistic, formal and abstract language develop an understanding of the conceptual and normative basis of the institutions, nor does it help to comprehend them in the context of their concrete functioning in everyday life. With such language, students are not able to make sense of social processes and structures. They "receive and internalize misrepresentations of marginalised and oppressed groups and visualise society in the image of its dominant groups" (Jain,

2004, p. 189). Such an internalization also helps to establish the hegemony of the State and dominant groups.

At this moment, a warning may not be out of place. It is possible that a Social Science textbook or a teaching-learning material or the language of a teacher may be quite ordinary and thus may seem accessible. It is also possible that the textbook may have several exercises and activities for students. But such a simple language may still present a statist perspective, may not question the social order or may present a narrative from the perspective of the dominant groups. Pragati, a series of contextualized support material, meant to be used as workbooks for practice in the Directorate of Education schools in Delhi, is a case in point. In Pragati 4, the chapter "Public Facilities" tries to identify "the role of government in providing essential public facilities", but makes no reference to why these facilities are unequally distributed across the city. Carved in the statist frame of old civics, it does not provide any critique of the state or social relations (Delhi Textbook Bureau, 2017, p. 35-48). The statist perspective in Pragati 4 is also evident in the chapters on marginalization, where there is greater focus on the recall of state provisions.

In the next section of this paper, I will discuss how an alternative use of language can question the hegemonic representation and present the possibility of a counter-narrative.

Alternative Uses of Language: Effort and Reception

In 2003, we were part of a group that was developing new Civics textbooks for Classes 6-8 for SCERT Delhi. Inspired by the Social Science textbooks developed

by Eklavya, we used narratives, storyboards, photographs, comparisons, in-text questions, while simultaneously building on what the children already knew (Batra, 2009). In the Class 7 civics textbook, we introduced the chapter on citizenship with the following sentence, "Main Bharat kee nagrik hoon" (I am a citizen of India). Here, the speaker was a young girl who identified herself as a citizen of India. Many members of the textbook team, while reviewing the draft of the chapter, objected that the other members who had drafted this chapter were distorting the language. In their minds, the correct language should have been, "Main Bharat ka nagrik hoon". In this proposed version, the speaking subject was a male and this was presented as natural, normal and right. It reiterated and reinforced the invisibilization of the girl students as the speaking subjects, kept them voiceless, imagined only males as citizens, subsumed girls in the masculine narrative and treated it as natural. By changing "ka" to "kee", we had not only changed the language, we had also inserted a new voice. This new voice was the voice of a girl student who was no longer just a recipient of the textbook knowledge, but was now herself the

speaker of the text and could identify with that speaker.

Concluding Remarks

Quite clearly, the question of language in social science is about the very themes with which Social Science engages. While discussing the appropriateness of the language, we need to make note of the cognitive dimensions of language development with regard to the ages of the students concerned; we also need to recognize that languages have histories and operate in social contexts. If every discussion about knowledge and education must answer the question of purpose, then deliberations around Social Science, language and their interrelations too must be addressed. As we adults engage with these questions, we should not forget that children have their own agency, which should find expression in their Social Science classes and language use. But children also live, act, appropriate and reproduce hierarchies of power through language, and a Social Science class has to engage with that as well.

References

- Batra, Poonam. (Ed.) (2009). *Social Science learning in schools: Perspective and challenges*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd.
- Delhi Textbook Bureau. (2017): *Pragati - 4, 2017-18, Social Science Class VIII*. Delhi: Delhi Textbook Bureau.
- George, Alex M. & Madan, Amman. (2009). *Teaching Social Science in schools: NCERT's new textbook initiative*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd.
- Jain, Manish (2004). Civics, citizens and human rights: Civics discourse in India. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 1 (2), 165-198.

National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2006). Position paper *National Focus Group on teaching of Social Sciences*. New Delhi: National Council of Educational Research and Training.

Pandian M. S. S. (2008). Writing ordinary lives. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(38), 34-40.

Sevlam, Salai & Geetha V. (2009). *Textbook regimes: A feminist critique of nation and identity, Tamil Nadu*. New Delhi: Nirantar.

Call for Papers for LLT 17 (January 2020)

A Special Issue on Language Acquisition in Non-Tutored Settings

Guest Editor: Prof R Amritavalli

Languages are learnt not only in a language class (formally), but outside it (informally) also. In India, a great deal of informal language learning happens due to migration within the country: for a job, for education, or due to marriage (many brides marry into a spousal home whose languages are different from that of their own home). We wish to document personal experience stories of such informal language learning in teenagers and adults in this country. The contributions should not exceed the word limit of 2200 words; it is only in rare cases of theoretical interest that we accept papers that are 3000 words long.

Please tell us: What languages you learnt informally as a teenager or adult? Why you did so? (Did you have to do so, did you want to do so?) How you learnt them (Who did you speak to? Who spoke to you? In what contexts? Or did you start by reading?) and how long you took to do so? Do you only speak, or also read, and perhaps write, in these languages? How good are you in these languages, by your own estimate, and that of others? Please send us your papers as a word document in MS Office 7. For images, send us jpeg files of high resolution.

Send your contributions to: jourllt@gmail.com